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OPINION

All Those Moles in America

The agency's real fear is a long-term Soviet agent in the upper reaches of the clandestine services.

Intelligence services are like wrestlers in a darkened room—they *feel* their adversary. The quiet grappling of the CIA and the KGB tells us how the two sides are really getting along.

By Thomas Powers

It all ended in smiles at Geneva, but if you want to know what the relationship of the United States and the Soviet Union is really like, forget the speeches of Mikhail S. Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan and watch what the KGB and the Central Intelligence Agency do. This is hidden most of the time, but an extraordinary series of spy stories in recent weeks has opened a window into the secret world of the intelligence war. Most of them are related to the case of Vitaly Sergeyeveich Yurchenko, the high-level KGB defector who stayed in this country just long enough to suggest the other side is winning.

In the business of espionage the word "dangle" is a term of art. It can be either a verb or a noun. It jumps out at the reader in the CIA's densely detailed, three-page biography of Yurchenko, who requested political asylum at the U.S. Embassy in Rome in August, then apparently changed his mind and went home in a blaze of publicity on Nov. 6. For three years in the early 1970s, the CIA biography says, Yurchenko was responsible, along with other duties, "for the insertion of agents [dangles] into Western, especially American, intelligence services." This fact poses a question certain to animate CIA counterintelligence experts for many years: Was Yurchenko a dangle?

Questions of this sort keep CIA directors awake at night. At lunch one day in 1977, Richard M. Helms asked Benjamin C. Bradlee, editor of the Washington Post, "Do you know what I worried about most as director of the CIA?" Bradlee had many ideas but all were wrong. "The CIA is the only intelligence service in the Western world which has never been penetrated by the KGB," Helms told him. "That's what I worried about."

We can be pretty sure the current director, William J. Casey, is much troubled by the same thing. Many penetrations of the CIA have been revealed in recent years—one of importance just last week, when a CIA analyst, Larry Wu-Tai Chin, was arrested and charged with selling documents to China over a 30-year period. The Chin case is a serious matter, but the agency's real fear is of something much worse—a long-term Soviet agent, or "mole," in the upper reaches of the clandestine services.

Since the early 1960s, a number of Soviet defectors have claimed the existence of such a mole without being able to identify him. The story is long and involved. Some analysts believe the defectors, some not. It's all very confusing. Yurchenko is said to have identified a spy in the CIA who had already left the agency, Edward L. Howard, and then fled the country in September. Inevitably this report is wrapped up in the controversy over his own bona fides—was Yurchenko telling the truth, or was he sent by the KGB to deflect suspicions from the real culprit? The arrest last Monday of yet another spy identified by Yurchenko—a National Security Agency analyst, Ronald W. Pelton—is evidence that he was what he said he was. But arguments over bona fides can never, by their very nature, be settled once and for all. In an interview with Helms some years ago I mentioned a friend of mine who was investigating the case of an earlier Soviet defector who had disappeared in Vienna. "He can do it if he likes," Helms said. "I wish him well. But he'll never find out what happened." Helms was right, of course.

There are several good reasons why intelligence services spend so much time and trouble attempting to penetrate their opponents. Learning secrets is only one of them. The secrets, after all, are mostly of the house-keeping variety—who holds which post, how things are done and the like. The name of an agent or two is an occasional bonus. The real goal is to "muddy the waters," another term of art.

An intelligence service can be crippled by an opponent in three ways. The first, and by far the hardest, is to feed it false information of consequence, thereby infecting its advice to national leaders. The second is to embarrass it, so that even good advice is taken with a grain of salt. The third is to burn it in an episode so painful and confusing that the target service loses confidence, misses golden opportunities through caution and turns inward in recrimination and acrimony. In this light, the truth about the Yurchenko affair seems almost beside the point. The waters have been thoroughly muddied: Reagan seems to think Yurchenko came to do mischief; the CIA is hard-pressed to explain to congressional oversight committees how the fish got away, and at war with itself over what went wrong. What once seemed like a major coup—Yurchenko's defection, coming hard on the heels of other high-level Soviet defectors in London and Athens—now looks like a major disaster. Whatever he told the CIA during three months of debriefings will go into the files with a permanent shadow over it.

What really happened? Naturally, I don't know, but perhaps the old philosophical principle of "Occam's razor" must apply—the simplest theory that explains the known facts is most likely to be true. In this case the simplest theory is that Yurchenko defected and then changed his mind. His press conference at the Soviet embassy was a nice touch intended to muddy the waters—and it did. He may survive and even prosper back in Moscow, but only, I suspect, in order to back up the frail theory he was a plant.

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Does any of it matter? In peacetime not much, in wartime plenty. Nations go to war with their intelligence assets in hand. Once the shooting starts, new spies are hard to come by.

Is anybody winning the intelligence war? This is hard to say. Some counterintelligence people claim that arrests prove they are doing their job. Other apologists say the real change is not more spies, but more prosecutions. Past cases were handled differently. Once discovered, spies were turned, or "doubled," and then used to feed false information to the other side. But no such claims can hide the serious damage caused by spies uncovered recently, beginning with the Walker case in May. The CIA officer, Howard, apparently identified by Yurchenko, allegedly compromised an important CIA spy in the Soviet Union. Chin worked for the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, a CIA subsidiary, but officials say he had once operated in document-control, with access to highly classified Asian reports.

The Pelton case could yet prove the worst of all. He worked for the nation's largest and most secret organization, the National Security Agency, which breaks codes and monitors Soviet communications of all types. Technical collections systems costing millions may become useless once the other side knows how they work. Only the bare outlines of these cases have been made public but the muffled cries from intelligence officials in Washington are unmistakably pained.

For the moment the CIA's score card does not look good, but the KGB probably isn't much happier with its own recent setbacks, and in any event the purpose of intelligence services is not to score points. It is to close with an opponent. Big successes, like big defeats, obscure the importance of what is to be learned from simultaneous contact at many points.

Intelligence services are like wrestlers in a darkened room—they *feel* their adversary through close watch of his embassies, listening to his broadcasts, attempts to recruit his officials, reading his newspapers, monitoring his economy, photographing his military installations and a host of other means. A well-placed spy is a valued asset, but nothing a spy might say can match the intimate body-heat of enveloping contact. The quiet grappling of the CIA and the KGB can tell us how the two sides are really getting along. The picture that emerges is a troubling one. What I see is fear, distrust, hostility and the pursuit of malign advantage without foreseeable end. □